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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MUSCAT 000504

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TAGS: PREL PTER KISL IR IZ MU

SUBJECT: CENTCOM COMMANDER ADMIRAL WILLIAM J. FALLON
MEETING WITH SULTAN QABOOS

REF: MUSCAT 414

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Oman's Sultan Qaboos bin-Said met May 12 with Admiral William Fallon, commander of U.S. CENTCOM. On Iraq, the Sultan spoke positively about Prime Minister Maliki, but noted that Maliki and his ministers needed to do more to govern for "all Iraqis." He also indirectly criticized the attitudes of other GCC leaders towards Maliki and Iraqi Shi'a. The Sultan warned against Salafist extremism, especially in Saudi Arabia, and emphasized Oman's attempts to promote religious tolerance. He argued that individuals should not identify themselves as "minorities," and should place nationalism over tribalism. Regarding Iran, the Sultan faulted the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps for creating problems, but hoped its influence in Tehran was waning in favor of "moderate" voices. The Sultan stated that Oman would provide Iran with "fresh ideas" on how to break the current impasse with the international community over its nuclear program, and confirmed that he would meet with Iranian President Ahmadinejad on his upcoming visit to Muscat. End Summary.

MALIKI "SINCERE," BUT NOT A STRONG LEADER

¶2. (C) USCENTCOM Commander Admiral William Fallon, accompanied by the Ambassador, CENTCOM Polad and OMC Chief (notetaker), met May 9 with Sultan Qaboos at his farm near the northern city of Sohar. After a discussion on agricultural and water issues, the subject turned to the recent visit to Muscat of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (reftel). The Sultan stated that while Maliki was not a "strong leader," he had a "good mind" and was very aware of the problems plaguing Iraq. He commented favorably that Maliki appeared "sincere" during their conversation and did not attempt to play down the challenges he faced. The Sultan also stated that the recent conference in Sharm al-Sheikh was a positive development as it allowed Maliki to speak to a wide array of officials from the international community.

¶3. (C) The Sultan stressed that he was different from "the others" as he understood the importance of supporting Maliki. (Comment: From the Sultan's remarks, it was evident that "the others" referred to the leaders of other GCC states. End Comment.) He acknowledged that no Iraqi government would be "able to please everyone;" similarly, it was impossible for any Iraqi official to enjoy "100% support."

Nevertheless, the Sultan noted that he advised Maliki to act and be seen as a leader for "all Iraqis." He further told Maliki that the Iraqi government needed to "do more" to help stabilize the country, and should look less to outside assistance. The Sultan also counseled Maliki, which he reiterated to Admiral Fallon, that "the others" could not be permitted to meddle in Iraqi affairs as they wanted Iraq to remain weak and divided.

ISLAMIC EXTREMISM VS. PROMOTING TOLERANCE

¶4. (C) Addressing sectarian issues, the Sultan said that it was "not true" that Iraqi Shi'a as a group were beholden to Iran. The Shi'a, he explained, were similar to the Jews in that historically they have not been aggressive in trying to convert others to their beliefs. Moreover, while the Shi'a did ultimately seek to control the Islamic world, their tactics differed from those of their Salafist opponents. In addition to being very aggressive about adding to their numbers, Salafist leaders, the Sultan opined, "have no moral code." Referring to current problems in Saudi Arabia, he stated that Salafists were not hesitant to advocate violence - such as calling for the killing of their perceived enemies - and actively recruited others "to do their dirty work," including by promising to pay the families of those killed in conducting terrorist operations. The Sultan asserted that the concept of jihad in Islam only permitted the use of force for defensive purposes and in accordance with certain restrictions. The decision of when and how to use such force, he continued, was a job for national governments, not for individuals.

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¶5. (C) The Sultan stated that under his direction, Islamic religious education in Oman was being transformed into a broader study on Islamic cultures. He remarked that it was "a blessing" that Islam encompassed different schools of thought and cultures, and noted that the Grand Mosque he built in Muscat purposely contained cultural elements from around the Islamic world. He emphasized that "tolerance" should be a hallmark of Islam and other religions, and commented that religious faith "is what is in your heart, not in what you say." The Sultan also commented that it was natural for there to be a wide variety of religious beliefs as "man was created to think."

"NO CITIZEN IS A MINORITY"

¶6. (C) The Sultan strongly opposed the concept of "minorities." "If you're a citizen, then you're not a minority," he declared. While acknowledging ethnic, religious and other differences among Omanis, the Sultan firmly asserted that Omani citizens should not view themselves as members of a distinct sub-group that is somehow separate from or has different overall interests than the country as a whole. He agreed with Admiral Fallon that those who see themselves as "minorities" were more likely to also consider themselves "victims" when they disagreed with government policies or decisions. The Sultan similarly rejected the idea of religious-based governments, noting he had once told a former Prime Minister of Thailand that Salafists in that country could not be allowed to advocate for a separate state for Muslims.

¶7. (C) Focusing on the influence of tribes in the region, the Sultan stated that Iraqi Sunnis were more divided than the Shi'a because they were "more tribal." He disparaged tribes or sects that looked down on others, and noted that while such prejudices had never been "too bad" in Oman, he nevertheless had worked to eliminate discriminatory tribal beliefs. The Sultan affirmed that tribes could play a useful

function and saw no problem with the maintenance of tribal identities as long as people clearly viewed themselves as Omanis first.

IRANIAN INTENTIONS

¶18. (C) Turning to Oman's long history with Iran, the Sultan stated, "Sometimes we're friends, sometimes we're not." Commenting that it was "very difficult" to predict Iranian actions, the Sultan said he hoped that the influence of the "revolutionary element" was waning. He said that he found Iranian "moderates" to be realistic, but that Iranian policies - which were decided "at the top" - did not reflect this. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was particularly problematic, according to the Sultan, as its members, flush with money and power, appeared "close to going out of control."

¶19. (C) On the nuclear issue, the Sultan remarked that Iran had "trapped itself" by making continuation of its enrichment program a matter of national pride. To find a way out of the current impasse, the Sultan said that Oman planned to provide the Iranians with "fresh ideas." (Note: The Sultan refrained from stating anything further about this. End Note.) The primary goal of Iranian President Ahmadinejad, mused the Sultan, was to stay in power. He confirmed that he planned to meet with Ahmadinejad during the Iranian's upcoming visit to Muscat. (Note: Ahmadinejad is currently scheduled to make a one-day visit to Oman on May 14. End Note.)

¶10. (C) The Sultan dismissed theories that Iran was trying to build a new empire, stating that Iran was too fragmented and that its leadership realized the time for empires had passed. Nevertheless, Iran did have "cards to play" and was actively using them. In response to Admiral Fallon's statement that the U.S. was open to talking to Iran if it ceased directly assisting U.S. enemies, the Sultan simply replied that "talk would be good." Noting that only 1,000 Iranians resided in Oman, he claimed that there were approximately 600,000 living in the UAE, in comparison to only 300,000 Emirati citizens. The number of Chinese in the UAE, he added, was also growing rapidly. (Note: It appeared that the Sultan had doubts about the UAE's future ability to control its growing expatriate population, but he refrained from elaborating on the subject. End Note.)

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¶11. (C) The Sultan concluded the meeting by commenting that he found it "very difficult" to work with others for a common cause in the region. He also noted that while Oman did "not take sides" in regional conflicts and would continue its good working relationship with Iran, he and his government would always "stand with those who do right."

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Comment: As this was his initial meeting with the new CENTCOM commander, the Sultan appeared more interested in establishing rapport than in getting into too many specific details on regional issues. In his remarks, the Sultan was careful not to name other GCC countries or their leaders, but his criticism of GCC attitudes towards Iraq was apparent nonetheless. Similarly, while the Sultan did not directly criticize the Saudi clerical establishment, at one point he clearly equated Wahhabism with Salafist extremism.

¶13. (U) Admiral Fallon has reviewed this message.
GRAPPO